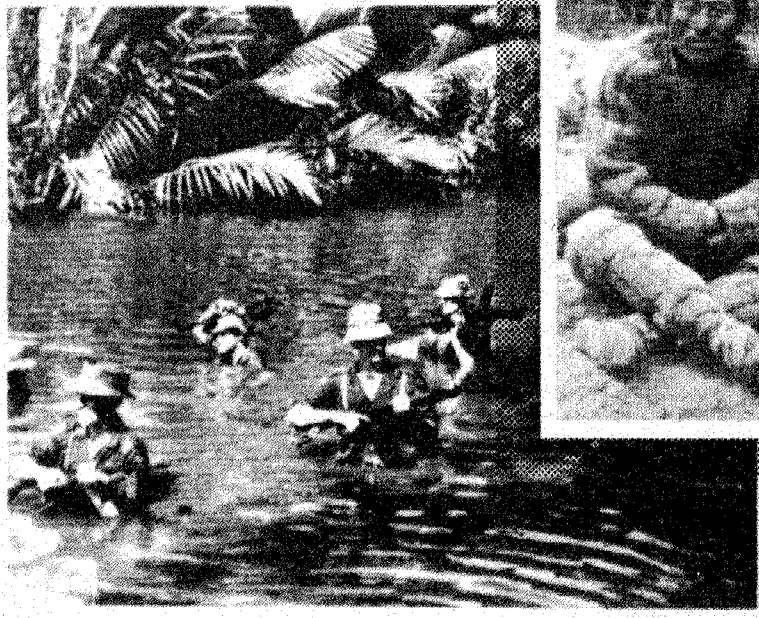


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Research Survey No. 6

# A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry

by Major Scott R. McMichael



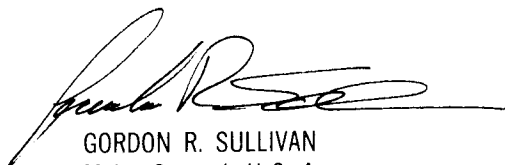
## FOREWORD

The U.S. Army's commitment to light divisions is testimony to the importance of light infantry in modern war. The continuing usefulness of light forces goes beyond their ease of deployment. Light infantry exemplifies a state of mind that reveals itself in a unique tactical style, versatility, and élan that are so vital in battle. While the structure of light infantry makes it admirably equipped to fight in restricted terrain, it operates at considerable disadvantage in areas more suited to heavy forces. As with any military organization, commanders must consider both the capabilities and limitations of light infantry before committing it to battle.

Major Scott R. McMichael provides a valuable historical perspective for understanding the characteristics, organization, and operations of light infantry forces. Major McMichael's *Research Survey* examines four light infantry forces operating in varying settings: the Chindits in the 1944 Burma campaign against the Japanese; the Chinese Communist Forces during the Korean War; British operations in Malaya and Borneo from 1948 to 1966; and the First Special Service Force in its battles in the mountains of Italy during World War II. These examples are diverse in terms of time, areas of operations, and opposing forces, yet they reveal common characteristics of light forces and their operations.

*A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry* is based on extensive research in primary and secondary historical sources. The author has uncovered numerous doctrinal and operational manuals and reports and has gone beyond them to explore the more personal side of light infantry operations. This study is both fascinating reading and a valuable historical analysis of the capabilities and limitations of light infantry when faced with the test of battle.

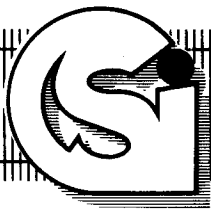
September 1987



GORDON R. SULLIVAN  
Major General, U.S. Army  
Deputy Commandant

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# INTRODUCTION

What is the precise meaning of the term "light infantry"? How does light infantry differ from regular or conventional infantry? Are light infantry and dismounted infantry synonymous? Is light infantry merely conventional infantry given a light organization by stripping out heavy equipment and vehicles, or is it something quite different in terms of tactical style, attitudes, and utility? Are light infantry forces specialized elite forces or not? Do light forces have utility in low-, mid-, and high-intensity conflict?<sup>1</sup> These questions and others have occupied the attention of planners and trainers in the U.S. Army since 1983 when the Chief of Staff of the Army decided to introduce light infantry divisions into the force structure. Four years later, most of these questions remain unanswered. However, two main bodies of opinion have formed.

On one side of the issue, participants in the debate advance the idea that the primary determinant of light infantry is its organization. Light infantry forces, they argue, are light because they possess no organic, heavy equipment. They fight on foot, in close terrain, employing tactics that do not vary significantly from tactics employed by conventional infantry (i.e., motorized and mechanized infantry) forced to dismount. The value of light infantry, according to this line of argument, is its strategic mobility. It can be moved rapidly to "hot spots" anywhere in the world. Its activities and capabilities once deployed are less important than its ability to deploy to respond immediately to a crisis. This body of opinion is reflected most vividly in Field Circular 71-101, *Light Infantry Division Operations*, which describes the light infantry division essentially as a general purpose force. In fact, large portions of the text of this circular are identical to the text contained in FM 71-100, *Armored and Mechanized Division Operations*.

In contrast to this view, another interpretation exists, mostly European in its context and origins, that distinguishes light infantry from conventional infantry primarily on the basis of attitude and tactical style. Light infantry, from this perspective, has been a continuous component of European military formations for almost 300 years. Originally appearing in the form of French *chasseurs*, Prussian *Jaegers*, and Austrian *Grenz* regiments, these European light forces were used initially in skirmishing, hit-and-run raids, ambushes, ruses, and as guards for the main forces. In contrast to the strict, drill-style maneuvers of the heavy infantry, these light infantrymen were fleet, nimble, and resourceful—capable of operating independently from the army. The development of light infantry in Europe was paralleled in the New World by the rise of similar light units, such as the 60th Regiment of Foot and the American Ranger companies, units raised for scouting, skirmishing, and countering the activities of the French and Indian irregulars.

The European concept of light infantry expanded during the wars of the Napoleonic era. From 1790 to 1815, light units proliferated, evolving to include light artillery and light cavalry, and assuming a wider role on the battlefield. Covering withdrawals, screening advances, confusing the enemy and keeping him off-balance, light units made their presence felt at Ulm, Jena, Auerstedt, and throughout Wellington's entire Peninsular campaign in Spain. Employment of light infantry by European powers has continued unabated into the present day.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of these long years of experience, the European viewpoint on light infantry holds that light infantry is, first of all, a state of mind, and secondarily, a product of organization. The light infantry leader's mind-set, or ethic, differs significantly from the mind-set of conventional infantry leaders according to this view. This distinct light infantry mind-set produces a unique tactical style not normally exhibited by conventional infantry.

The purpose of this study is to clarify the nature of light infantry more definitively. To support this goal, the general characteristics of light infantry forces will be identified, and an analysis of how light forces operate tactically and how they are supported will be presented. In the process, the relationship of the light infantry ethic to its organization will be evaluated, and the differences between light infantry and conventional infantry will be illuminated. For the purpose of this study, the term "conventional infantry" will refer to modern-day motorized and mechanized infantry and to the large dismounted infantry forces typical of the standard infantry divisions of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

This study concludes that light infantry is, in fact, unique and distinct. A light infantry ethic exists and manifests itself in a distinctive tactical style, in a special attitude toward the environment, in a freedom from dependence on fixed lines of communication, and in a strong propensity for self-reliance.

No such thing as a standard light infantry force exists: light infantry comes in all shapes and sizes. It has been employed in various environments by a variety of national armies. Understanding the nature of light infantry thus requires a thorough examination of light infantry forces in their diverse forms.

Consequently, this study is based on a historical analysis of four separate light infantry forces that were employed during and since World War II. Each case study is different, the forces having been selected for their diversity of size and organization and for the purposes for which they were used. These forces also exhibited differences in the intensity of their conflicts, the nature of their threats, and in the terrain and climate where they were employed.

Chapter 1 concerns the Chindits, a seven-brigade force commanded by Major General Orde Wingate in the 1944 Burma campaign against the Japanese. Composed of British, Gurkha, African, and American troops, the Chindits conducted large-scale, guerrilla-style interdiction against Japanese lines of communication in the jungles and mountains of northern Burma for a period of five months.

Chapter 2 addresses the operations of the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) during the Korean War. The CCF was a light infantry army. Lacking the

industry necessary to equip and transport its legions, the Chinese relied on a philosophy of "man over weapons" (i.e., manpower used to counter weapons superiority). Its enemy, the U.S. Army, in stark contrast, wielded the most technologically advanced army in the world. The mid-intensity war between the two powers, ranging over cold desolate mountains, barren hills, and frozen streams, resulted in a stalemate.

British operations in Malaya and Borneo from 1948 to 1966 are the subject of chapter 3. This case study explores the use of light infantry forces in protracted counterinsurgent warfare. Although the terrain and climate of Malaya and Borneo are similar to that of northern Burma, this case study differs significantly from the chapter on the Chindits in terms of the nature of the threat, the methods of organization, the level of intensity, and the tasks undertaken by the light forces.

The last case study moves out of Asia into the mountains of Italy. Chapter 4 examines the First Special Service Force (FSSF), an elite, Canadian-American, regimental-size light infantry force especially trained for amphibious assaults and operations in snow-covered mountains. The FSSF established a remarkable record of accomplishment in its two short years of existence from 1942–44, during which it was employed in a wide variety of roles.

Collectively, the four case studies represent a wide array of terrain and climate: jungle, swamp, tropical mountains, relatively dry mountains (Korea), cold areas, snow-covered mountains, and—in the case of the FSSF—isolated island strongholds. The threat ranges from strong German conventional divisions to small parties of Chinese terrorists. The sizes of the forces vary from army level to battalion level and smaller, with units differing in organization. The four case studies encompass elite and nonelite light forces from four different national armies—British, Canadian, Chinese, and American—that were involved in mid-intensity war, low-intensity conflict, and rear-area operations. Finally, the types of tactical operations discussed include amphibious assaults, reconnaissance and combat patrols, ambushes, deep raids, conventional attacks, defense of strongpoints, static linear defenses, area sweeps, interdiction, and economy of force operations.

These diverse conditions ensure that the study has the proper scope and comprehensiveness to permit the drawing of legitimate conclusions on the nature of light infantry. Moreover, where appropriate, the study introduces the experience of other light infantry forces to reinforce or amplify specific points.

Each case study, while employing a fairly standard format, places the infantry force in a historical context, explaining how and why it came to be formed. The inquiry then examines each force's tactical environment, demonstrating its influence on light infantry operations. Next, the study discusses the selection, organization, and training of the force. Then, it evaluates the operational employment and tactical techniques of the force in the offense and defense. This is followed by an analysis of the force's combat support, leadership, and logistics. Each case study closes with a review of the problems experienced by light forces and presents a number of pertinent conclusions.

Chapter 5 synthesizes the information and conclusions presented in the four case studies. Identified in greater relief are the four components of the

light infantry ethic. Also brought into greater focus are the principles that govern the organization, training, operational employment, tactics, combat support, logistics, leadership, and role of technology for light infantry forces. The chapter closes with a review of the problems and vulnerabilities of light infantry. The text concludes with a table comparing the distinctive differences between light infantry and conventional infantry.

This study does not directly address the issues of strategic deployability, contingency operations, and the heavy-light forces mix in Europe. It also generally steers away from evaluating specialized light infantry forces such as Rangers, Commandos, and airborne units. While these types of forces may properly be considered as light infantry, their costly, specialized training, privileged access to resources, and unusual capabilities place them on the fringe of the genre. This study does not ignore these forces: the FSSF is representative of the type, and a short discussion of the Special Air Service (SAS) is also found in chapter 3. The emphasis of the study, however, is on the less-specialized light infantry forces.

Finally, this study is not an argument for or against light infantry divisions. Even though it offers many insights into and implications for the training, organization, and employment of light forces today, only a few specific recommendations are made. In this regard, this study is descriptive, not prescriptive. On the other hand, this study provides a solid historical perspective on the essential nature of light infantry. It enumerates a number of principles concerning how successful light infantry forces have been organized, trained, and employed. Thus, it can serve as a repository of historically verified guidelines on the use of light infantry.

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# NOTES

## *Introduction*

1. The terms "low-, mid-, and high-intensity conflict" are used periodically throughout this study. Their definitions are provided below. The definition of low-intensity conflict has been adopted officially by the U.S. Army. No official definitions of mid- and high-intensity conflict exist. The ones chosen below are commonly used as working definitions throughout the U.S. Army. They are from U.S. Department of the Army, FM 100-20, *Low Intensity Conflict* (Washington, DC, January 1981), 14; and FM 100-20, *Low Intensity Conflict*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS, 16 July 1986), v.
    - Low-intensity conflict: a limited political-military struggle to achieve political, military, social, economic, or psychological objectives. It is often protracted and ranges from diplomatic, economic, and psychosocial pressures through terrorism and insurgency. It is generally confined to a geographic area and is often characterized by constraints on the weaponry, tactics, and levels of violence. Low-intensity conflict involves the actual or contemplated use of military capabilities up to, but not including, combat between regular forces.
    - Mid-intensity conflict: a war between two or more nations and their respective allies, if any, in which the belligerents employ the most modern technology and extensive resources in intelligence; mobility; firepower (excluding nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons); command, control, and communications; and service support for limited objectives under definitive policy limitations as to the extent of destructive power that can be employed or the extent of geographic area that might be involved.
    - High-intensity conflict: a war between two or more nations and their respective allies, if any, in which the belligerents employ the most modern technology and extensive resources in intelligence; mobility; firepower (including nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons); command, control, and communications; and service support.
  2. This short summary of European light forces draws from David Gates, "Western Light Forces and Defence Planning. 1. Some Parallels from the Past," Centrepiece no. 8 (Aberdeen, Scotland: Centre for Defence Studies, Summer 1985), 1-32.
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